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OPINION

Opinion: Lessons from the Rust Belt about climate change restructuring

By **Steven High, Special to Montreal Gazette**

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There is an urgent need to radically transition the global economy away from fossil fuels or face climate disaster, but "we must also ensure that the staggering social cost of the coming economic restructuring is shared fairly," Steven High writes. kodda *Getty Images/iStockphoto*

There has been a lot of talk recently about the urgent need to radically transition the global economy away from fossil fuels or face climate disaster.

We need to find the political will to change before it is too late. We must also ensure that the staggering social cost of the coming economic restructuring is

Make no mistake: tens of millions of people will lose their jobs. Hundreds of communities will lose their economic raison d'être. Such transitions are painful and usually profoundly unfair. To pretend otherwise is to risk repeating history. We have seen this before.

Since the 1960s, trade liberalization fundamentally restructured the global economy. Falling trade barriers between countries meant multinational corporations could locate factories, or find suppliers, wherever labour was cheapest and where government regulations (for example, pollution controls) were weakest. The international division of labour fundamentally changed, with manufacturing shifting *en masse* from highly unionized Western Europe and North America to low-waged Asia and Latin America.

To use a car analogy, world leaders put the economic pedal to the metal, greatly accelerating our velocity toward the climate wall ahead of us. The transition in global capitalism was highly profitable for some; devastating for many; and potentially deadly for all of us in the not-so-distant future.

It was no coincidence that the postindustrial transition saw a sharp rise in income disparity within countries. Once-proud cities like Detroit were pulverized. We had to invent new names like the "Rust Belt" to describe the human wreckage.

Statistics tell part of the story. As a share of total employment, Canadian manufacturing fell from 22 per cent in 1973 to just 10.3 per cent in 2010.

bargained away in international trade negotiations.

The body count was staggering. Seventy-five per cent of all the mills and factories operating in Canada in 1961 were closed by 1991. Nothing filled the economic vacuum in some communities.

The pain behind these numbers is all too real. I've been interviewing displaced workers since the mid-1990s. They all speak of the steep material consequences of job loss: lost wages and benefits as well as the scramble to start over in an unforgiving economic environment.

One Buffalo, N.Y., steelworker told me this story: "I heard about the closure on television on the six o'clock news. Then, a couple weeks later they phoned me up and said 'you got a 35-year pin that we have here. We'd like to give it to you.' I said 'OK.' He said, 'meet us at the front gate.' You know, everything was closed so the fellow, our superintendent at the time, he gave me the 35-year pin. You can picture a chain linked fence, he handed it to me through the fence. 'Here is your 35-year pin.'"

It could be perverse here, too. In the early 1980s, 500 steel workers at Stelco's Canada Works in Hamilton were loaded onto buses without explanation. They were driven out to Toronto's Ontario Place, a 30-minute drive away, where they were told that their mill was going to close, and then bused back. You can't make this up.

Trade unions couldn't do much, as hundreds of factories closed beneath them. Working-class communities were therefore left to pick up the pieces. Meanwhile, unemployment insurance eligibility was tightened up, and benefit amounts and duration were all rolled back.

Is it any wonder that displaced industrial workers saw that transition as fundamentally unjust and unfair?

experiences with one-sided transitions will no doubt colour how many working-class people view demands for change. Right-wing populists will find fertile ground. But if we are to have a future, it is essential that we learn from the past and do better.

Steven High is a professor of history at Concordia University.

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